DAWN

OPINION

The morality trap

WHEN Donald Trump says that his power is restrained only by "my own morality", he is not just boasting, he is making a case for a philosophy that governs his rule. In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, the US president argued that international law, treaties and institutions apply only when he decides they do. The argument has surface appeal. Rules are slow, alliances awkward and multilateral bodies frustrating. Why should a superpower bind itself when it can act? Yet this view misunderstands the purpose of law. Rules between states were not created because leaders are naturally wise or restrained. They were created because history shows us what happens when power goes unchecked. Mr Trump's remarks suggest that these limits are optional. If international law aligns with US interests, it applies. If it does not, it can be ignored, redefined or brushed aside.

Mr Trump's worldview is straightforward. Strength decides outcomes; law follows later, if at all. This thinking was visible across the interview. Greenland was discussed as something to be owned rather than respected as an ally's territory. Venezuela was treated as a problem to be solved by military action. Throughout the discussion, the underlying view appeared to be that strength gives permission. Except, there exists this contradiction: rivals, he insists, must not use the same logic. China should not act on Taiwan; Russia should not redraw borders. The objections lack principle. Whereas American power is exceptional, making the country's actions acceptable, others' is destabilising. Such logic cannot hold. Rules applying only to the weak vanish. Other states will take notes and copy the example. Treaties become temporary and morality becomes whatever the powerful declare it to be.

The same pattern appears within the US. Congress is respected until it resists. Courts matter "under certain circumstances". Emergency powers stretch when challenged. A parallel can be seen closer to home. Pakistan's own history shows what happens when power claims to stand above law. Whether under military rulers or hybrid arrangements, decisions have often been justified in the name of stability, security or higher national interest. Yet this reliance on personal discretion has weakened institutions, blurred accountability and left citizens unsure where authority truly lies. When leaders decide that their judgement is a better safeguard than rules, uncertainty, not order, follows. A system that rests on personal morality is a fragile one. Leaders change. Tempers flare. Incentives shift. What remains is the example set. If law is treated as optional by those who wrote it, it will soon be ignored by those who did not. The danger is not that America will act forcefully. It always has. The danger is that it will stop explaining why force should be limited at all.

Police-levies merger

THE Balochistan government's decision to formally merge the over century-old levies force into the Balochistan Police and abolish the distinction between 'A' and 'B' areas represents a paradigm shift in its approach to the administration of law and order for improving security across the province. By placing all territories under police jurisdiction, the government has ended an arrangement rooted in colonial-era governance to better address crime and the province's present-day security challenges. The move is expected to resolve long-standing administrative ambiguity, end uneven and discretion-based enforcement of the law, and equip the province for better policing and counterterrorism under a uniform police command structure. While levies personnel are often recognised for their local knowledge and community ties, the force, which controlled nearly 90pc of the province's territory, was ill-equipped to combat modern organised crime, militancy and the crime-terror nexus. Moreover, they were frequently accused of operating at the behest of their tribal chiefs, undermining their role as impartial law enforcers. Thus, the move will both improve the state's writ and ensure accountability.

That said, the decision may trigger criticism from the beneficiaries of Balochistan's fragmented policing, as well as those who genuinely believe that the province's unique sociopolitical and geographic realities demand a localised, community-based policing structure as provided under the levies force operating under the district administration. This is not the first time that the levies have been merged with police. In 2002, under Gen Pervez Musharraf, the levies were disbanded, its personnel merged with police and the entire province declared an 'A' area under police control. Yet the security situation did not improve, leading to the reversal of the move in 2010. At the end of the day, the police-levies merger signifies the rationale that centralisation and institutional consolidation of the provincial law-enforcement agencies will deliver the desired results and strengthen state authority in Balochistan. However, if this move is to succeed — the province has been grappling with terrorist violence for over two decades — the authorities would have to integrate the strengths of the levies, such as community trust, into the reformed policing structure rather than just absorbing the personnel.

Denuded future

THE political leadership appears out of sync with the annual wrath of the elements. Scores of trees in Islamabad face the axe. Large-scale eradication of green cover has left four patches in the Shakarparian area "bald and barren", while similar activity is underway in H-8, Chak Shahzad and Park Road. The latter's towering trees have fallen prey to a dual carriageway project leading to Margalla Enclave. Reportedly, an interchange beside the Park Road will be constructed for the housing scheme. These steps have sparked outrage among residents and environmentalists. Minister for Climate Change Musadiq Malik was quick to counter the criticism over the loss of thousands of old trees. He claimed that 29,000 paper mulberry trees "which are a major cause of allergies and have caused deaths among chronic asthma patients" were cut down in line with Supreme Court orders in 2023, adding "one tree chopped is being replaced with three new saplings".

But Dr Malik's defence does not hold water. A large number of trees in Chak Shahzad, H-8 and Shakarparian were decades old, and did not belong to the aforementioned species. Paper mulberry trees are recognised by their light green leaves, while *sheesham*'s are dark green. This is a clear abuse of the law; not only is the measure unscientific, it is also a violation of the procedures specified by the Environment Protection Agency. In addition, the hurried tree plantation drive in January, an unsuitable time due to frost, is beyond counterproductive. It is time the authorities realised that many parts of the world view deforestation as a crime. Greenery is nature's shield for extreme heat and crucial ecosystems. Thicket lowers risks from floods and landslides and improves environmental resistance to climate change. Desertification harms biodiversity and disturbs life-supporting ecosystem assistance. Forest cover must be preserved and re-established for a viable future.

BY MALEEHA LODHI

'Donroe doctrine' in action

Trump seeks sole control of the Western Hemisphere and its resources.

OVERTHROWING governments in Latin America has long been the US practice from a familiar playbook. The US has for decades intervened by military force to oust governments and assassinate leaders in the Western Hemisphere. More often than not, it has succeeded. Sometimes it has failed, as in trying to kill and remove Fidel Castro in Cuba epitomised by the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. This triggered the Cuban Missile Crisis that drove the US and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war.

The US-backed coup in Chile in 1973 involved the assassination of its elected Marxist president Salvador Allende and installation of a brutal regime under Gen Augusto Pinochet. Another CIA-sponsored coup deposed Guatemala's elected government in 1954. In 1989, the US invaded Panama to oust Manuel Noriega, capture and extradite him to stand trial in America. The US-led invasion of Grenada overthrew its government in 1983. Over 40 US interventions are said to have 'succeeded' in the past century and a half. This includes the invasion and capture in the mid-19th century of over half of Mexican territory. The US also engineered regime change and toppled governments in countries beyond Latin America — Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Against the backdrop of this predatory history, the US attack on Venezuela ordered by President Donald Trump followed a well-trodden path. But that didn't make it any less egregious. President Nicol s Maduro was captured by American forces and taken to the US for trial. The armed intervention was illegal — a breach of international law and norms and violation of Venezuela's sovereignty. It sent shock waves across the world and invited condemnation from many countries, while legal experts and some Democratic lawmakers called it an "act of war". Five Latin American countries and Spain issued a joint statement which said, US actions "constitute an extremely dangerous precedent for peace and regional security". It expressed concern about any "external appropriation of natural or strategic resources". Venezuela's interim President Delcy Rodr guez declared, "we will not be anyone's colony".

In a blatant display of imperial ambition, Trump vowed to run Venezuela, "take back" its oil and have American oil companies exploit its oil resources. Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves. This laid bare a key motivation of the intervention, which was not strategic deterrence against drug traffickers but commercial aggrandisement. It was a throwback to the past, when in the so-called 'banana wars', US-armed interventions sought to secure its commercial interests. Above all, Trump's action was about establishing dominance over the Western Hemisphere, signalling Washington would dictate policy there and control its resources.

The US military action came after months of escalating pressure on Maduro who Trump accused of links with drug smugglers without offering evidence. He also blamed Maduro for the influx of Venezuelan migrants into the US. Maduro's offer for talks on narco-trafficking and oil was spurned by Washington. Instead, the US carried out strikes on Venezuelan vessels alleged to be transporting drugs and imposed a naval blockade to enforce an embargo on oil exports. Maduro accused Washington of aiming to overthrow him and take control of his country's vast oil reserves.

The attack on Venezuela can be understood in the context of the Trump administration's recently released National Security Strategy (NSS). This made enforcing the so-called 'Trump corollary' of the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere a top priority. The original doctrine was to prevent European recolonisation and communist influence in the region. The 'Trump corollary' or 'Donroe doctrine' is designed to assert a proprietary claim and exclude China (whose trade and investment influence has been growing in Latin America) and other "non-Hemispheric" powers. Trump doesn't just want the Hemisphere to be in Washington's sphere of influence but for the US to have sole and exclusive control over its natural resources.

For all Trump's earlier claims about non-intervention in the internal affairs of countries, also reiterated in the NSS, he has made regime change his policy. He issued warnings to Cuba, Columbia and Mexico about possible action and separately to Iran while repeating the threat to seize Greenland. The latter elicited a response from Denmark that such action will spell the end of Nato.

America's experience with regime change has hardly been edifying, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya. It has always ended badly for the US and brought grief and suffering to those countries and shed so much of their blood. When the US tried to 'run Iraq' it proved a disaster. No wonder that a majority of Americans express fears about the US getting 'too involved' in the South American country, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll. Alarmingly, the survey also found two-thirds of Republicans supported the attack.

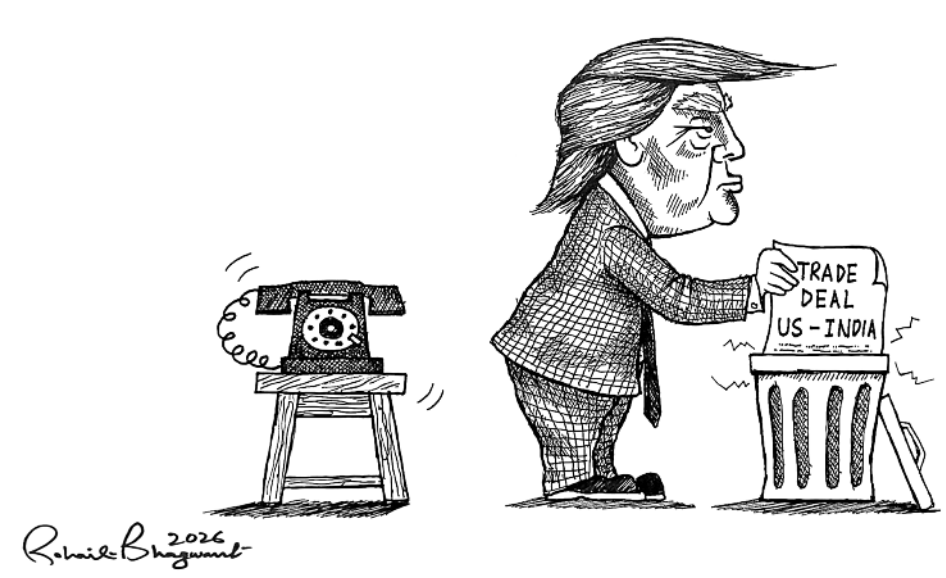
In the UN Security Council emergency meeting called to discuss Venezuela, the US was roundly condemned by China and Russia as well as American allies. Washington was accused of taking the world back to an 'era of lawlessness' and undermining the 'foundation of world order'. Pakistan's envoy warned that "unilateral military" actions can lead to "unpredictable and uncontrolled outcomes" for years.

The Trump administration is unconcerned by international criticism. How Trump proposes to 'run Venezuela' is the key question. As for his plan to 'take over' oil resources, he announced that Venezuelan authorities will hand over up to 50 million barrels of sanctioned crude to the US. The money earned from its sale will be controlled by him. But for American oil companies to reap a bonanza is not simple, given Venezuela's poor oil infrastructure and need for massive investment. Already US oil giant ExxonMobil has told Trump Venezuela is "uninvestable" without major changes. A private investor is cited in the *Financial Times* as saying, "No one wants to go in there when a random tweet can change the entire foreign policy of the country".

The US may have bitten off more than it can chew. Venezuela can descend into chaos and greater regional instability can ensue with the US squandering whatever goodwill it has in the Hemisphere. As the *New York Times* put it in its editorial, Trump's action represents "a dangerous and illegal approach to America's place in the world". Once again, the tactical success of the US action in Venezuela is likely to end in strategic failure. ■

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.

NO TRADE DEAL AS 'MODI DIDN'T CALL'



BY MURAD MOOSA KHAN

Mental health in a broken world

"The stark reality for the vast majority of people in the non-Western world, transcending everything, is poverty. Currently one quarter of the global population lives in near destitution and 3.5 million children die of starvation annually. What is 'mental health' in this broken social world?" (Summerfield, 2012)

IN recent years, mental health has been attracting a lot of attention — globally as well as in Pakistan. Terms like 'anxiety', 'depression', 'trauma', 'neurodivergence' and 'well-being' frequently come up for discussion on public forums and social media. In Pakistan "increasing awareness and decreasing stigma" about mental health has become quite fashionable. Telepsychiatry, helplines, online platforms for connecting with psychologists and counsellors are making mental healthcare much more accessible to people. On the surface, all this seems promising, but it begs a deeper question: are we medicalising human suffering and distress in ways that obscure its social origins? A new book, provocatively titled *Searching for Normal* by Dr Sami Timimi, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and psychotherapist in UK's National Health Service invites us to consider precisely this: how we understand and conceptualise distress, what are its root causes and how we respond to it.

Timimi describes a global mental health system in which distress and behavioural differences are increasingly framed as medical disorders requiring diagnosis and treatment. Rather than viewing emotional suffering as a natural response to adverse social and economic conditions, we are encouraged to see it as a pathology — something inside the individual that needs fixing. Timimi calls this a "mental health industrial complex" (much like the military-industrial complex) and highlights how diagnoses, therapies, medications and self-help markets form a complex network of interests that benefit from ever-expanding definitions of illness.

Over the last few decades, the number of psychiatric diagnostic labels has multiplied exponentially — from attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to autism spectrum disorders to new stress and trauma classifications. While some help guide support for genuinely disabling experiences, they are also cultural constructions rather than discrete biological entities with clear tests, like diabetes or tuberculosis. Timimi points out that psychiatric diagnoses are not grounded in objective biomarkers but in symptom clusters that vary across cultures. What counts as a 'disorder' is shaped by cultural and economic forces, not just science.

The dramatic rise in the diagnosis of ADHD and autism in recent years, Timimi observes, is linked to incentives and structures of profit-making, wherein market forces, pharmaceutical interests, and diagnostic expansion intersect. We are already seeing a similar trend in Pakistan as people are increasingly self-diagnosing based on checklists freely available on the internet and asking to be put on medication. This is not only pathologising, but is reducing complex social realities into 'conditions' to be treated.

This is not to deny the reality of suffering or a criticism of therapy or to be psychiatric care per se. Distress is real and suicide, self-harm, anxiety and depression affect individuals and families deeply; some individuals benefit from clinical support, and severe psychiatric conditions exist and deserve compassionate, evidence-based care. But when ordinary distress — sadness after loss, anxiety during economic struggle, restlessness in adolescence — begins to be treated as a diagnosable disorder, we must ask how we understand and respond to that suffering. Should mental healthcare be primarily about diagnosing and treating individuals or also about reshaping the social world in which they live?

> The medical model of mental health thrives on individualisation of systemic problems.

A mental health strategy that focuses on treating symptoms with medication and therapy, that ignores the conditions that produce those symptoms, also ignores prevention. It forces mental health professionals to treat symptoms without improving the lives of people in meaningful ways. Societies facing economic hardship do not need more medicalisation; they need jobs, food, housing, safety and security.

The medical model of mental health thrives on individualisation of systemic problems. Focusing on individual self-management, self-care, or 'fixing the chemical imbalance' in the brain deflects attention from collective and structural solutions, including human rights, economic reforms, and social and economic justice.

Timimi's book urges us to view people not through the lens of pathology with the goal of returning them to a vague 'normal', but to ask what is "normal in a broken social world?" It means taking an approach that goes beyond "raising awareness, decreasing stigma or including mental health in primary care" and to also focus on social welfare, education and economic opportunity. It suggests that schools, workplaces, mosques and neighbourhoods should be part of a collective mental well-being ecosystem, not just referral points to clinicians.

For Pakistan, this has important implications, as social determinants — poverty, unemployment, violence, widespread disparity, social and economic injustice, institutional corruption and lack of social protections — are powerful drivers of distress. Research shows that inequality and insecurity are strongly linked to poor mental health outcomes. In communities affected by conflict, natural disasters or chronic poverty, emotional suffering is often a response to external conditions, not an internal defect. Framing this distress as a mental abnormality diverts attention from policies that should address their root social causes.

Importantly, it forces us to question how we conceptualise distress in countries like Pakistan and whether we are conflating distress with clinical states of depression and anxiety. If distress is framed primarily in clinical terms, then we seek a medical solution — medications or counselling/ therapy (or both) — while people continue to battle the same social conditions that caused their distress in the first place.

A humane, contextual approach to mental health acknowledges that suffering is often a response to lived conditions — poverty, violence, marginalisation — much more than some chemical imbalance in the brain. It calls for policies that address these conditions upstream, while also providing care that is compassionate, culturally grounded, and socially informed.

There is need for broadening our vision — thinking of mental well-being not as a product of individual pathology, but a reflection of societal conditions. Only then can we move towards creating a society where healing is shaped by justice, solidarity and care. ■

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